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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to the questions: "How do we shape classroom life to reflect a spirit of social justice and equality, of tolerance and respect?" It presents a philosophy and a set of practices by which preschool classrooms may become communities that work for everyone. The paper begins with an observation of a preschool classroom and notes that the process of developing a classroom of individualistic children into a community whose members regard each other with growing respect, trust, and interest depends on the teacher or leader. The paper maintains that teachers build a community on four components of leadership: (1) acceptance of the leadership role; (2) knowledge of child development; (3) knowledge of early childhood education; and (4) a commitment to teaching by modeling. Each of these leadership components is examined in turn, focusing on the responsibility of the preschool teacher or administrator and providing suggestions for ways each component of leadership can be implemented in the early childhood classroom to teach values of compassion and responsibility. The paper notes that for some children, safety and order take priority over sowing seeds of compassion and responsibility and makes suggestions for teaching children with behavior problems. The paper concludes that although leadership demands a great deal from good teachers, administrators, and other staff, the efforts to achieve excellence in teaching are worthwhile. (KB)

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Child Development Institute

Sarah Lawrence College

occasional paper # 3

Summer, 2000

The Classroom as Community:

Ideas From an Early Childhood Teacher

Jeannette G. Stone

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The Classroom as Community:

Ideas From an Early Childhood Teacher

by

Jeannette G. Stone

Child Development Institute
Sarah Lawrence College
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Note to the reader:

I have based my views on my 1953-97 experiences as a preschool teacher, administrator, and consultant -- in cooperative preschools, Head Start programs, a college lab school, and child day care centers, including special education classrooms. Children in these settings have come from diverse economic and ethnic homes and neighborhoods.

Staff members in centers for severely disabled children, as well as those with extremely limited budgets, may feel that particular realities prevent their adoption of some practices described here -- such as class trips or purchase of quality materials, which can be expensive. I know how some teachers have to modify their programs for practical reasons and yet how ingenious they are in upholding high standards.

I really believe that the basic philosophy in this paper applies to all facilities for children. All children attending childcare programs benefit from respectful teaching and they all belong to classroom communities, whether they are in family day care or in large inclusive urban centers. My hope is that they will enjoy learning to be together, in whatever setting they find themselves; that they will thrive as individuals; and that they will take good care of each other.

FOREWORD

As we entered the Millennial year 2000 (both eagerly and soberly) my colleagues in education and I found ourselves thinking about the world of elementary and secondary school our preschool students would enter before long, and wondering about the kinds of school children they would become.[1]

We had been stunned by the hostile, occasionally violent, school behavior we had witnessed on TV over several months. We had heard stories of teenage scapegoating and bullying as well as indifference or disdain from clique members toward other people. We had heard from youngsters that past experiences of being teased and "dissed" by classmates had resulted in their humiliation and anxiety. And like so many other people, we were puzzled and troubled.

Within professional early childhood circles, we had held to certain beliefs and had taught young children accordingly. We had tried hard to help each child to feel valued and competent and to behave respectfully toward other children and toward adults. We had hoped that our classrooms were microcosms of decent living, of fair play, of communities in which all could thrive and participate. We also hoped that this kind of early education would continue to influence children's thinking and behaving as they got older.

[1] "The Classroom as Community," was the subject of a workshop conducted at the 1999 Summer Institute of the *Empowering Teachers* Program sponsored by the Child Development Institute at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. This paper grew out of the presentations by Yvette Richardson and myself at that workshop.

But now hard questions arise: had we been unrealistic? One answer: even as a lot of aggression and intolerance are acted out all through our society, other behaviors reflect people's generosity, kindness and cooperation. One behavior is no more real than another is. Yvette Richardson asks this compelling question. "How do we shape classroom life to reflect a spirit of social justice and equality … of tolerance and respect?"

My own response is that it is crucial that programs for children of all ages provide strong leadership and crystal-clear messages for both children and their families. This is what we believe in, this is what we work toward, and this is how we want people to behave and to care for and about each other.

I believe that these messages are extremely important and helpful to children, beginning early in life, and that they must continue. Cop-out slogans ("kids will be kids" or "they'll grow out of it") actually impede the development of values like compassion and responsibility, both at home and at school. All the more reason, then, for us to teach such values as compassion and responsibility with conviction – because, in fact, we see how they serve to transform classrooms into communities that work for everyone.

In this paper, I will try to describe a philosophy and set of practices by which classrooms become such communities. We will start in the preschool -- where we will see a good program in action.

VISIT TO A PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

Let's visit a group of three-to-four-year-old children in a preschool classroom -- housed in a comprehensive child care center in a mid-size American city, in April.

Entering the room we pass, to our left, a pet rabbit in his large floor cage -- a beloved sentinel -- and large, well-stocked block shelves to our right. On to a colorful House area furnished like a kitchen / living room with dress-ups, a small stove and refrigerator, and doll beds with dolls of all sizes and colors. Around to our left, a children's studio and laboratory area equipped with a copious supply of art materials, manipulatives, simple language and math materials; a water table; and a low shelf fitted out with plants, aquarium, magnifying glasses and related science picture books. Here are two spacious worktables: one to accommodate children occupied with self-initiated artwork, and the other, on this particular day, offering fit toys -- puzzles, Lego sets. We notice an inviting book corner. Children's artwork is matted and displayed on the walls along with a local artist's drawings and an abstract art print.

What captures my attention -- besides the dynamic, comfortable classroom -- is the nature of the children themselves. Sixteen in number, they were about three years of age (plus or minus a bit) when they arrived last September from home or from a toddler / Twos' program. Now in the spring, they are veteran preschoolers, and this is how they busy themselves: four build with blocks -- planning, arguing, trying out ideas; two paint at the easel; one designs a collage; three work side by side fitting wooden puzzles together; one constructs a Lego tower. A couple of House players are "cooking" for a three-year-old Grandma feeding a baby doll in her lap.

Two blow bubbles at the water table. The room hums with talk, laughter, exclamations, a shout, a wail, teachers' responses, conversations and exchanges rising, falling, and unending. The same for clusters of children at the art and water tables, the science and book centers.

Ten minutes later some of these children will be in the same places, deeper into intricacies of their work and play. Others will have moved on to different areas. They choose what they want to do during this play / work period of an hour or more from materials set out by their teachers, often in response to children's interests.

Are these children always friendly, purposeful, and cooperative classmates? Have they been all along? How was it when they entered the center back in September?

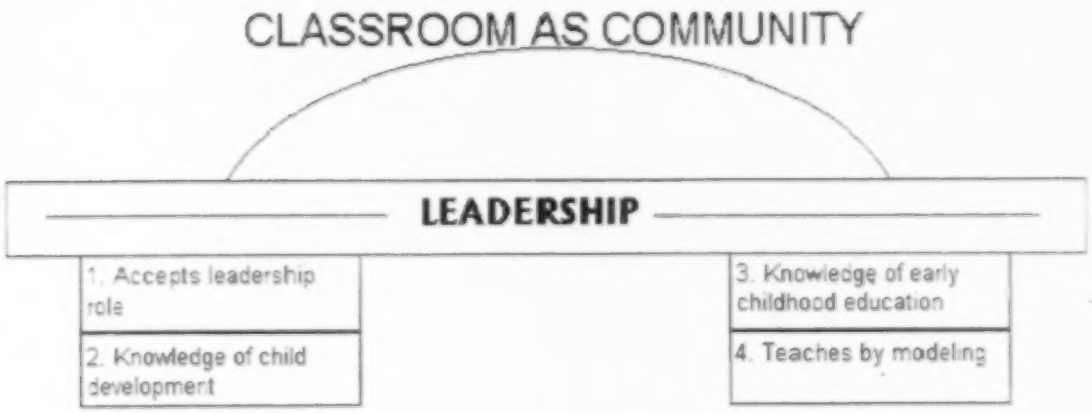
Sixteen (new-to-school) Threes presented themselves during those beginning September weeks in all styles and varieties: some curious, wide-eyed, eager; some apprehensive and uncertain; some sure of themselves; some aggressive; some wanting their Moms; some independent one day and crying for Mom the next; some actively exploring; some observing. Each was engaged in his or her daily encounters with this group's personalities, confusions, shared pleasures, and growing connections.

The process of developing a classroom of individualistic children (many new to each other at the start of a program) into a community of children who regard each other with growing respect, interest, and trust depends on the teacher or leader. When her goal is a classroom in which the children come to know and care about each other and develop mutual regard and concern, then she purposefully leads children over time from the world of "me" to the world of "us."

How does the teacher accomplish this goal? What are her strategies for planning, day to day? What does she have to know? What is the foundation upon which she builds this community?

I visualize the foundation as a sturdy plank, which I call Leadership, which rests on the following crucial supports:

1. Full, ready acceptance of the leadership role.
2. Knowledge of child growth and development: history, research, experiences.
3. Knowledge of early childhood education; of dynamic, appropriate curriculum.
4. Commitment to teaching by modeling: children learning from adult behavior about respect for themselves, for others, and for their surroundings.



LEADERSHIP

Leadership in early education programs refers to the director of an entire center or school, as well as to the head-teacher of each classroom. These authority figures are most effective when they understand early education and developmental psychology, have plenty of experience in the classroom, and believe in the benefit to children and families of strong leadership as well as feeling responsible for providing it (a modicum of modesty and humor help, too).

A good leader is firmly in charge. She never abuses power, but also never feels weak or apologetic about assuming it. She values the individual differences among all persons under her direction and believes in the dignity and respect due each and every one. She feels responsible to the entire group of children in the classroom, the staff, and the parents. She balances her act -- managing to clarify goals and rules even as she projects friendliness, good faith, and optimism.

An understated or tentative style of direction might, by contrast, seem more flexible or laid-back to some but ultimately could confuse people, "muddy" the issues, and invite testing behavior.

Harsh leadership is, of course, valued especially by the harsh leader! It excludes democratic processes and may generate apathy or mutiny.

When I contemplate problems with weak or harsh leadership and teaching, I have to try then to define democratic, effective leadership. It is this: effective leaders are notable for their knowledge and wisdom, their decision-making skill; their ability to listen, reflect, and

communicate clearly, and to work toward mutually trusting relationships. They establish and adhere to common sense, humanistic standards for one and all.

For example: if bullying is going on and the person in charge doesn't like it (and we hope he doesn't), he takes steps to stop it. He explains his position and sets forth what is and is not acceptable. He follows that with clear, positive suggestions. No "double talk", no confusing messages. This unambiguous, fair, firm leadership provides security and clarity for all involved, whether in preschool or college, whether the group numbers 16 or 1600. It provides the foundation necessary for the classroom to become a community that works for everyone.

KNOWLEDGE OF GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Serious educators demonstrate strong, persistent interest in how children grow, how life circumstances influence their behavior, and how one's teaching practices impair or enhance their development.

There are many helpful sources of information about children's ages and stages. They include textbooks, research reports, college and graduate courses, conferences, and discussion with mentors. It behooves teachers and directors to perceive themselves not as already knowing the field, but rather as lifelong learners of it. A wonderful resource for lifelong learning is analysis of one's own daily experience. It might go, on a typical day, as follows:

How can I present alternative materials to the children who felt today's set-up at the science table was too tough? Challenge is fine, but this was really too hard; it turned many of them off. Next time I will offer a much wider range of these materials.

The Katz and Chard[2] project approach is compelling, and we are talking about introducing it this spring, starting with Fours and Fives. All of us on the staff are eager to learn more about it.

It would make sense to treat the children to a snack of blueberries before I read Blueberries for Sal again; some of them didn't know, today, what blueberries were

I need to find out from Raymond's father when the new baby is due. Raymond is having a rough time these days, and we'd like to help him feel better.

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[2] Katz, Lilian and S.Chard Engaging children's minds: the project approach. (1989) Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp.

Recalling, reflecting, imagining different scenarios, mulling over one's observations of each child, contemplating the group's total well-being: now you are your own special resource -- able to integrate your insights and experiences with the information available to you from books, journals, and colleagues.

As a fellow teacher might put it, you need to know your "stuff": know past and present child growth and development literature, first of all. You will want to learn all you can about the basics of infancy and toddlerhood for background. You need to observe children, not just casually but with your eyes and mind wide open.

You note differences among Twos and Threes, Threes and Fours, Fours and Fives -- all growing, changing, edging forward in physical skill, in language and intellectual development, and social growth. You know that Twos seek autonomy and can be quite oppositional, though endearing. You know that Threes are often "sunny" and are learning language in ways that help them make friends as well as understand stories. You know, too, that they can regress to biting or whining, then leap forward to becoming helpful, polite, cooperative -- sometimes all in the same day!

You are familiar with Fours' uneven behavior: their humor (which can verge on colorful), their flair for cognitive mastery along with imaginative and creative thinking; and their occasional bursts of emotion -- expressing jealousy, sympathy, fear, or just delight in being alive.

You may look forward to the time when Fours become Fives, but Fives are still preschoolers. Usually more stable, more reflective, more articulate, more mature socially than they were at Four, Fives can slide back just when you think they've come such a long way. In general, they respond eagerly to kindergarten activities which call for them to pursue an activity

with diligence, grasp an abstraction, concentrate, recall, cooperate, hone a skill, delay gratification, and speak pleasantly -- all of which were not solid attributes during their Four-year-old lives.

We adults can't help feeling excited and gratified when children move ahead toward overall maturation. They grow larger, stronger and smarter. Their vocabularies burgeon. They become more independent, more skillful, more experienced, and more organized. They're on their way. But every so often they display a contrasting developmental need: the need to regress. Just when they have succeeded in pleasing themselves and us with their new accomplishments, they may turn back to whining, dawdling, acting helpless, sighing and crying out that they can't!

This kind of regression is a real, true developmental phenomenon which builds up in children (in adults too, for that matter). As teachers, we find ways to accommodate children as they rock along their uneven way -- two steps forward, one step backward and then, of course, forward once again.

A concomitant of regression is children's occasional need to slow down. It is the developmental need children have for consolidating their gains, for feeling secure in their growth so far and for enjoying the sensation of mastery: "I learned how ... I can do this myself."

Experienced teachers are patient while children rehearse and practice and repeat what they have learned to do. The curriculum can take on a more deliberate pace for a while. Children need adults who take all this seriously and accept their behavior, no matter how slow or uneven their progress seems to be. They want to be able to trust us to be understanding and good-humored. They benefit by our knowledge of human development and our faith that all will be well.

However, once in a while teachers reach a point of wondering whether a particular child needs to be observed more intently or possibly to be evaluated by a specialist. The child's behavior may increasingly puzzle or worry us. It is a fine art for teachers, directors, and consultants to know when to move from careful observation, analysis, and full exchange with the child's parents, to a position of deciding that they are ready to proceed -- in collaboration with the family -- to seek special counsel.

Teachers and directors are obliged to think about children in two parallel ways: (a) what observation reveals about the child in question, and (b) what general, current knowledge of growth and development adds to good judgment and wisdom about this child and all children.

KNOWLEDGE OF CURRICULUM

The task of providing developmentally appropriate education for preschool children proves to be complex and challenging. Thinking back to what we know about children's growth and development (upon which curriculum is partly based), we can predict that a typical class will include children in various stages of their age group. A class of Fours, say, reflects developmental levels from Three through Five at times. Some preschoolers develop slowly, in need of easygoing activities; some race along, tackling challenging materials and projects with zest. The teachers' task is to value each child as is, observe closely and try to respond to each child's personality, cultural heritage, unique needs and capabilities -- while at the same time attending to and engaging the whole class.

Mastering preschool curriculum means that you, the teacher, visualize your program every day and then prepare the spaces and materials necessary to bring it about (yet allowing plenty of flexibility in order to respond to children's interests and events in their lives). You maintain interest in all you've learned about early education and how it differs from primary education. You have opted for a basic approach -- perhaps the developmental-interaction philosophy set forth by Barbara Biber.[3] You stay current, as well, with alternative systems like High / Scope, Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and others as practiced in our leading college and university lab schools, including those programs offered to children with special needs. Dynamic eclecticism grows out of a lively, open-minded study of curricula. Good preschool programs generally feature a play period lasting at least an hour, along with story, group meeting, music, snacks or

[3] Biber, B., Shapiro, E.K., & Wickens, D. (1977). Promoting cognitive growth: A developmental interaction point of view (2nd ed.). Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.

lunch and outdoor play. Daylong programs include meals, nap and self-care routines. An enormous literature exists on preschool curriculum.

This paper is clearly not an attempt to summarize it or to offer novel ideas for activities. Rather the aim here is to look at ways children's day-by-day experiences influence not only their individual progress and well being but also their perception of themselves as members of the class. As time goes on and as individual needs are met with warmth and respect, children appear able to move out -- toward each other -- feeling safe, liking the feeling of belonging together, and liking to play together.

Leading early childhood writers and practitioners believe that play is the core of the preschool curriculum.[4] Play is a word I want to qualify, however. To work well, play must be valued by the teachers as central to early education and crucial to children's learning and thriving. In order for everyone to enjoy it, play has to be constructive; that means it must be kept track of and subtly shepherded along. It is a travesty to permit play to degenerate into a chaotic free-for-all. It is a travesty, too, for teachers to direct a "play" period in which young children are expected to sit for long periods doing table work, and to limit approval to children who are nice and quiet.

There are common misconceptions about play and "free" play. The term free play doesn't mean kids are free to dash about, heedless of people and objects around them, with their teachers looking puzzled or helpless. Free play means that children are free to choose from a variety of engaging, enticing activities prepared and set forth by the teachers for constructive use. It is meant to be safe and fun and imaginative and purposeful. "Learning through play begins early,

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[4] Van Hoorn, J., P.M. Nourot, B. Scales, & K.T. Alward. (1999). Play at the center of the curriculum, 2nd. ed. New York: Prentice Hall.

close at hand, as the child explores and uses a range of materials in the classroom, as she comes together with others to develop play structures and scenarios."[5] Constructive free play needs teachers who are willing to work at it -- to be available always for help, encouragement, limit-setting, interpreting. Sometimes a lot of guidance is needed; sometimes, little or none. Teachers tune-in even as they make sure not to intrude.

Things don't go harmoniously or comfortably if the program is allowed to become too hard, or too easy or stagnant. Preschool kids need lots of great things to do. Again, you're the teacher. Are there fresh science materials set-out to discover and explore? Can you provide water and sand play every so often? Finger painting? Cooking? Maybe a pretend car wash with small rubber cars in basins filled with soapy water or in the water table -- and then maybe a trip to the car wash? How about other trips -- to a florist, say, or a lumber yard, a bus station, a bird sanctuary, a big pile of leaves in the fall, or a building where there's a spiral staircase? And back at school you suggest that they try building a spiral staircase with blocks. Some of these might be walking trips. Have you had a chance to prepare a couple of kits to carry out to the playground to enrich the outdoor environment as carefully as you prepare indoors ... a few tote-bins for different days -- some rhythm instruments to be carried to the yard on one day; or a supply of magnifying glasses, paper, markers, scissors and tape on another day; or rakes and tools with a gardening project in mind?

Curriculum isn't limited to teachers' plans and activities. It drops into our laps unexpectedly for us to seize on if we're receptive -- as in the following episodes.

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[5] Franklin, M.B. (1999). Meanings of play in the developmental interaction tradition. Bronxville, NY: Child Development Institute, Sarah Lawrence College, p.5.

A child stomps on a caterpillar during an afternoon walk. You're the teacher. You use the incident to share your own feelings about caring treatment of living beings. You're not mad, you're just clear. The child hears you -- and so do the others.

A child makes a snide racial remark during free play. You react. Not by scolding or shaming but by telling the child and the other children, outright, that you don't want that talk in this class because you believe that respect is due every person, here and everywhere. (What you say depends on the ages of the children listening. But you use this unplanned episode to add your convictions and ethical standards to the children's consciousness.) You try not to moralize or add feelings of guilt to your message, but you are strong. The children -- often from varied and diverse backgrounds -- will remember what you have said.

A child teases another: "You don't have a papa." Again, you, the teachers, talk to the issue: each family is different and each is OK ... some have fathers ... some children live with Grandma ... some stay with an aunt and uncle. You make it clear that you value each child and each family in this class, and you expect people to treat each other with kindness and respect.

A child taunts another for "talking funny". Your answer reflects your warm welcome of children and families from other countries -- some speaking language new to us.

It isn't always quite this serious. There's the Mom who drops in unexpectedly one day with a basket of apples for the class. First of all, how wonderful to have a Mom visit! Then, "Shall we eat the apples today at lunch or make applesauce tomorrow?"

Spontaneous use of all such occasions brings spice, vitality, and important content to our prepared curriculum plans. You, the teacher, keep track of each child's activities and favored playmates, each child's history and evolving life experiences, and each child's health and developmental issues. You support Threes and Fours who ask how to write letters or to spell

words, as well as Threes and Fours who push trucks around the room, hang out at the sand table, study the magnet set so intently every day, or dress the dolls again and again. You tune in to each child's style of learning and thinking. And you gently, sensitively encourage next steps. Thus you are enabled to provide responsive, stimulating curriculum for this child -- that child -- each child -- and for the entire class of youngsters learning about each other, and learning to care about each other and their surroundings.

Far from forcing friendliness and superficial niceties, a good teacher tries for subtle, dignified ways to build mutual respect and camaraderie among these young children. She gradually leads the children, day by day, into a widening perception of their classmates -- not only by her skillful responses to individuals but also by her attempts throughout the curriculum to foster their inter-relatedness.

Teacher at end of story: "What a great book! We brought it from the library yesterday -- remember? You all were really listening just now. What did you think about the turtle? Yes, let's read it and talk about it again tomorrow. I'd like to hear everybody's ideas."

Teacher on the playground: "Mike, you fell off the climber pretty hard, just now! Come sit on the log with me ... are you OK"? To children coming to look: "Yes, Mike had a fall. Remember that Seiko fell down last week playing with the big ball. It happens ... Tony, can you bring the tissue box over? We'll stay here, Mike, until you feel better." No cajoling, no negative comments about tears. Instead: these things happen, and we take care of each other.

Teacher at circle: "Let's take a few minutes to talk together about the problem at nap time yesterday. Some of you were sleepy, and some of you wanted to get up and play. Right? I want us all to figure out how to solve this problem. You're good at helping each other -- what can we all do so nap works better this afternoon?"

When a child tells you -- the teacher -- at snack that she likes the graham crackers, you enfold the others in a spontaneous talk fest: "Keisha says she likes these crackers ... Jess, how about you? And Terry? ... No? How about Von?" On around the table. You respond to each answer; the children look from one to the other, following your lead. They become very aware of one another. Each person and each response, so important to you, now becomes important to each and every one.

Such are the beginnings of the classroom as community. The seeds of compassion and responsibility are being sown.

MODELING

It takes a while. Young children have a long way to go on their way to becoming compassionate, responsible members of a group. They need time to live through childhood egocentricity, immaturity, and inexperience before coming gradually to the point of regarding other people with interest and respect, assuming that is the ideal held by the adults around them.

Children learn to respect themselves and others as they approach school age, not by our sermonizing or by venting frustration with their naturally slow pace, but rather by our showing them what respect feels like and sounds like -- by our showing respect to them, first of all.

One hears a lot of "lip service" paid to the concept of respect. Many teachers and parents talk about the necessity for children to show respect to them, and they are quite serious about that. However, attitudes and expressions of respect start with the grownups and then trickle down.

Children listen to us, observe us, and imitate us. What teachers do, how they do it, and how they speak to colleagues, to parents, and to the kids themselves, all constitute role modeling -- modeling of responsible care of the environment, self-organization and self-discipline, respect for oneself and for others.

Respect for young children means that you, the teacher, project in the daily schedule your understanding and acceptance of children's needs to play, to pretend and to choose their activities. You accept their need to learn by discovery, by trial and error and from information at hand. They need to talk, to work hard, to create, to sing, to move around, to be read to, to rest, to run, climb, jump, to get messy and to clean up (with help) -- and to enjoy nutritious food with

friends and classmates. Respect for young children means that you create safe, appropriate, interesting surroundings in which children are comfortable and unhurried at the same time as they become engaged in a wonderful variety of things to do and to learn.

It's a matter of balance. Many Twos and Threes like the simple satisfaction of getting to know where things are in their classrooms and feeling cozy and at home there. Older Fours and Fives like more novelty, more challenge and adventure.

The large furnishings of a classroom, whether for younger or older preschoolers, establish sturdy, reliable places for things. Block shelves go here tables and chairs there, art supplies near the windows. It's what's in and on these basic pieces that can offer variety, stimulation, surprise and pleasure.

A respectful teacher is willing to spend the time and energy it takes to add to, change, and refresh the room's supplies. She has learned that although constant, mindless switching things around is unsettling, a never-changing set-up is boring and fails to nourish the children esthetically and intellectually. The teacher expresses regard for each child and for the group by providing the most interesting environment possible.

The job is to keep fascinating ideas and activities flowing. February rooms need to look different -- more complex and challenging -- than they did last October.

Rotation is the key. Storage space is every teacher's base of operations, whether one has cabinets and shelves (out of children's reach) or is reduced to storing supplies in cartons in one's car trunk. Rotation depends on storing some materials and putting out other materials. And it goes without saying that putting everything, or too much, out is very poor practice. Less is more -- that is, more easily perceived, organized, and managed successfully by the children.

I think that toys and materials are like "textbooks" of early education and that it behooves us to take respectful care -- and to model such care -- of the classroom environment. That includes supplies and materials and all contents of the room.

For example, furnishings fit the children: chairs not too low or high; sturdy, clean tables designed for average heights in this group; colors pleasant, not strident.

Bookshelves display appropriate, high-quality children's books -- with newer selections of books rotated every couple of weeks along with old favorites. A sign of disrespect would be a shelf of torn books or those displayed upside down, or a book selection that never seems to change.

Dress-ups are fresh and clean, with new and different items like vests, boots, or scarves added every so often to spark dramatic play.

Manipulative sets, for table work, are kept in clear categories. No Legos in with the bristle blocks! Some sets can be put aside and stored part of the time -- rotated with alternatives so that shelf displays always look inviting. Store the magnets, bring out the color forms and rotate tinker toys with hammer-nail sets, etc.

You and the children thrive in a classroom where things that have become old hat are phased out for awhile, to be replaced by different or recycled materials to refresh the scene. "Look ... here are the bean bags again. And the hollow blocks are back." "Remember that book about the boy's fifth birthday? It's on the bookshelf today." Then block building, or reading, can take off with fresh enthusiasm.

The kids need not view all this as magic. They can be in on your rotation plans, and perhaps they can make suggestions or help carry bins. However, the basic decisions and timetables for rotation comes from the teachers.

The ways in which teachers present easel painting can indicate respect for children's work (or lack of respect). Fresh paints and clean brushes at the easel are an example. The same red-blue-yellow pigments, week after week, lose their attraction and limit experimentation. After a time, try setting out paint colors like turquoise, peach, ocean blue, lime, lavender -- increasing and varying colors as the year progresses, especially with Fours and Fives. Vary the shapes of easel paper: rectangles of course, but also circles and triangles. Brushes and paper should be large through most of preschool, but surprising the kids with 9 x 12 paper and small-tip brushes can set off a burst of creative energy on a rainy day.

About rainy days: special shoe boxes or bins with supplies saved just for bad weather can be a great treat and an educational enrichment for children and teachers alike. However, it takes advance preparation. Some teachers save table games for bad weather; some introduce safe preschool sewing kits with burlap, yarn, and upholstery needles; some like to present special art supplies such as eyedroppers, paper towels, and bright tempera paints. Whatever it is, it's fun and stimulating. You're ready for March mud or April showers, when fresh ideas will help children work and play constructively. They feel good about being in this classroom. They feel cared for and respected -- and feeling that way helps them to behave in the same way.

* * * *

By March and April, teachers will have been communicating their values and information for several months of the school year. Children learn from what adults say and from how they say it. Teachers have enormous influence on children's behavior by speaking directly and honestly to them: modeling with words and manner how people deal with each other with respect, just as they would like to be dealt with.

Sad to say, one hears disrespectful language directed to children all too often. Grownups bark commands, scoldings, and criticisms. Whether this happens because so many adults are stressed or overwhelmed, or just careless and insensitive, a tone of combat is set. However, experienced and wise teachers and parents have shown day after day that it is possible to speak respectfully to children even when one feels worn down, if one believes in doing so. Adult courtesy is the only way for children to learn courtesy. Adult consideration for others is the only way for children to learn considerate behavior. It is the same with all behaviors. Honesty begets honesty.

Teachers' consistently lowered voices help kids learn that you don't have to shout. (Yes, of course one has to speak loudly on occasion, but not all the time!) Grownups who help children put away toys may be subtly teaching how to arrange objects into orderly categories, but they are also modeling ways to extend a helping hand.

Let's say a problem erupts in a Fours' classroom. Teachers, you're the models for resolving conflict. If you get mad and yell, the children will follow suit. But teachers don't have to scold, shame, threaten -- which don't cure misbehavior anyway and don't teach how to behave in the future. Instead, when you model ways that clearly demonstrate your beliefs (taking a firm, calm stand against hurtful behavior, sharing your concerns or wishes with the children, stating your reasons and rules) you are modeling effective ways to solve problems. And I hope you use your hugs, your support, your willingness to listen, your protection, and your respect for them!

One hears parents and teachers -- often overwhelmed by troubles in their lives -- speak to children in ways that come across as belittling, as hostile, as put-downs. "Stop acting like a baby." Or, "You did that on purpose." Or, "Do you want me to bite you to show you how it

feels?" Or, "That's not nice!" Or, "If you keep doing that, I'm never bringing you here again." Or, "We're not going to have any time on the playground today because you didn't pick up your toys." Blame, blame, scold, scold. Blaming and scolding fail to accomplish what adults want to accomplish -- which is to persuade children to stop, listen, and redirect their behavior. Blaming and scolding fail to show children how to do that. They merely express adult frustration and anger. There are much more effective, and respectful, ways to speak to children.

"No, I won't let you do that, but tell me what's the problem....I promise to listen."

"What else could you do?.....let's think about it. I'll help you both figure this out."

"Donald! Tell him with your words! Luis, Donald has something to say to you."

"My job is to keep you safe -- to keep everybody safe. I want you to help."

"You people have five minutes to put away the blocks. I'll help you start."

This kind of communication models reason and courtesy; it provides kids with an effective model for the times when they will need to work through frustrations and conflicts on their own. It communicates to the children the fact that they can trust you -- you're on their side, not against them. You may not agree with, or permit, what they're doing, but you're still on their side. Besides, you're not standing over them. You are down face to face with them, on their level -- serious, sympathetic, supportive.

The seeds of compassion and responsibility are being sown.

POSTSCRIPT

There are a few children for whom all of this is not enough. Not often, but every now and then, one or two show up in our programs so enraged or so pained and disorganized that they seem compelled to disrupt, shriek, and strike out no matter what the circumstance. It is with these most challenging, provocative kids that teachers try especially hard to maintain their professionalism. It can seem hard to speak with respect, courtesy, compassion and patience to a child who continually hurts other children (or adults) and who trashes the classroom -- who scares the other children and who has a way of eluding his teachers.

Before seeds of compassion and responsibility can be sown for these children, teachers have to sow seeds of safety and order. They are obliged to spend much more time with these one or two (even three) kids than with the other children. That may seem unfair; but in fact all children in a class benefit from the teachers' control of primitive misbehavior, and they learn that the teachers are always fair and respectful with everyone.

It is often possible, over time, to take humane control of a wild, acting-out child and lead him or her up the steep ascent toward self-control. You make sure to greet such a child immediately as he enters the classroom each day -- offering him a snack or a toy he likes so that he doesn't begin his day by aimless wandering or trashing. You stay close. This is where a strong assistant or additional aide or volunteer is crucial. Teachers in these situations find themselves making a very strong pitch to their administrators for extra help. Classroom safety and order are at stake.

One "stays close" to an acting-out child, not with clenched teeth and a combative attitude, but rather with the unflappable conviction that you, the teacher, are always in charge and that he or she must accept your authority, learning better ways to behave in this classroom. And that you believe in the child's capacity to grow and learn. When kindness and good-natured helpfulness go along with firm teaching, the child and all of the other children can trust you. Trust opens the door to growth.

So, with courtesy, compassion, and respect, you lay down the law and help this child live by it. You help by staying nearby; by intervening immediately with, or stopping, major aggression; and by honestly praising him for non-aggressive, acceptable behavior. (You may have to be on the alert for that "good" behavior since it may happen all too seldom....but it will happen, and then you let him know how much you value it.)

"That's an interesting way to start a block building!"

"No, I won't let you knock down Jamal's blocks....please put them back where he had them. Come on -- I'll help."

"It's your turn to help Mr. Johnson push the lunch cart down the hall to our room today. He knows you do a good job of steering and that you're very strong."

" I want you to stop running in here. You can run when we go outside. Right now I want you to help Jess wash the big paintbrushes. Do you want to wash off the easel too? Great...that'll be a big help to everybody."

" I need to have you here with us. Come sit beside me while I read the story. No? Then Mr. Lorenzo will read the story and you and I will go sit in the hall. It's story time now, for this class, and that's what's going to happen."

Over weeks and months, you sow the seeds of safety and authority. Then will come the development, necessary for community life, of compassion and responsibility.

Every few years, it seems, one faces a child so troubled, so embattled by circumstance, that he or she cannot find a way to live with others in the classroom. If, after enormous effort along with ongoing consultation with his family, this child has been able to make no progress whatsoever, one may have to suggest referral not only for special help but for placement in a different setting. The hope is that the child and his family will find the help that is so urgently needed. This can be a very difficult and sad time for everyone. However, the health and safety of the other children in the class must be of first importance.

We always hope that we learn through such experiences, and that these children and their families carry with them a memory of caring concern.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The quality of leadership I have described, in good teachers, administrators, and other staff (including bus drivers, cooks, custodians, and outreach workers), demands a great deal of us. It demands more selflessness, more time and energy, more stretch and reach than we can always manage. Many teachers observe that children seem much more troubled – and troubling – than in former days. I know from my own experience that the scope of our work is enormous, that we try to hold to our standards, that we all have good days and bad days, and that excellence in teaching is not easy to maintain.

Early childhood teachers work for long hours for terribly low salaries. We've been faced, historically, with a limited public understanding of what we do, why we do it, how we do it, how we've been trained, how much we know, and the extent of our contributions to families and communities. Perhaps a much fuller public comprehension of early education is on its way. There are hopeful signs.

Even acknowledging realities, I will always believe that our efforts to achieve excellence in teaching are worthwhile. Why would we settle for less? The inner rewards and feelings of professional growth are wonderful. The children in our care seem to thrive. As teachers of young children, we hope that as these youngsters grow older, parents and teachers will continue to provide strong leadership. Thus we help them become respectful of others, confident, and responsible adults.

Suggested Readings

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